

## Q&A: Meagan Wolfe navigates 'very unique' challenges overseeing Wisconsin elections

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## Q&A: Meagan Wolfe navigates 'very unique' challenges overseeing Wisconsin elections

Briana Reilly | The Capital Times

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Wisconsin Elections Commission Administrator Meagan Wolfe

RUTHIE HAUGE

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**A**fter nearly a decade at the Wisconsin Elections Commission, including two-and-a-half years at its helm, Meagan Wolfe is no stranger to administering statewide contests and overcoming the hurdles that come with the job.

But the April 7 spring general and presidential primary, the state's first pandemic-era election, brought with it "very unique challenges" that Wolfe, a voter outreach specialist, noted she and her staff "had never had to deal with before."

This cycle is one that has featured extra efforts to secure poll workers and personal protective equipment amid the COVID-19 crisis, sometimes on-the-fly adjustments to comply with new court directives and a continued focus on election security efforts.

But for Wolfe, the biggest adjustment officials had to make in April was adjusting to "new voter behavior," in which more than 60% of people participated by mail, rather than the 6% of voters who typically did so.

"Every day something new comes up," she said in a recent interview. "You would think we've seen it all, but I don't think we have."

As the state turns its attention to the Nov. 3 presidential election, Wolfe is advising voters who are casting ballots absentee to do so as soon as possible.

She's also warning individuals to seek out "legitimate sources of information" for election-related news and updates, such as the Elections Commission or the local clerk's office.

"There's going to be bad information out there," she said. "It's going to feel like you're walking through a fog of information. And knowing where to go for legitimate information is really important."

**Looking back to April, it felt like nearly every day there was more and more work for WEC officials to do. How unprecedented was that spring election and how did you get through it?**

There were some very unique challenges to April, things that we had never had to deal with before. But what we had been doing for the last four years is really focusing on contingency planning. So we had been doing these scenario-based trainings with our local election officials. It started with a cybersecurity lens, of what would we do in these situations and we would have the scenario-based trainings and hundreds of our

clerks went through these. We had hundreds of events where they would practice a bad day in elections, which sounds kind of dark, but it was a very useful exercise because we would say, "What would happen in this weather emergency?" "What would happen in the case that there was a technology issue?" And we would actually develop contingency plans with them. And it's not so much about the, "in this specific black and white scenario, what would you do?" It's about developing that skill to think through problems and to have really resilient solutions that aren't just specific to maybe weather or cybersecurity. That also helped us, I think, through the April election, because it helped us make all of the local election officials really good problem-solvers.

The biggest adjustment we had to make was moving to a new voter behavior, which was voters participating by absentee ballots. So we went from a state where typically about 6% of voters participated by mail absentee to over 60% in April, and then it looks like participation for August isn't quite solidified yet, but we're talking about 80% in that August election. And so we had to adjust our technology, our training, work with the public health officials to reconceptualize all the Election Day in-person processes and train all the local election officials on that. We were fortunate enough that they trusted us through that process, and as we were able to create these new things in light of sort of this new world, that they followed us on that journey and were able to implement it.

### **Turning to this November, what is the Elections Commission's role in ensuring things go as smoothly as possible for the presidential contests?**

Our job is to implement the law and to provide the technology and training to our local elections officials and voters. It's been affirmed by courts and in the law that the commission cannot change dates, deadlines, procedures relevant to the law. So we can't extend the period for absentee ballots to be received; we can't make a decision to send everybody an absentee ballot. Those are things that would require a legislative change or an act by the courts. And we certainly saw some changes through the court system before the April election, and we may again before November, but we can't make those types of changes. Our job is really, again, just to implement the law and to

provide technology and trainings for election officials ... That's really our role is providing the framework and the structure for elections. Our role isn't to change the process; it's to find a way to administer elections in the framework we've been given.

**In the meantime, voters who have already requested absentee ballots will start seeing them arrive at their homes as their local clerks begin to fulfill those requests. Can you walk me through the timeline of finalizing ballots, first of all, and then getting them out the door and into voters' hands?**

The state law is that 47 days before the election, all the ballots that have already been requested have to be sent out. So if you put in a calendar year request, or if you already put in your request for November, those ballots will go out the door on Sept. 17. You still have up until the Thursday before the election to request your ballot, but the clerks have about a business day to turn those around as they get those requests.

It's important to note that the local election officials administer that process. So the municipal clerks, they're required to get an absentee ballot request form from a voter or a request in writing. That form has to identify the voter, they have to provide their photo ID if they haven't already, and the clerk is the one that then is going to make the determination if that voter is eligible to receive an absentee ballot ...

If you decide that voting by mail is the right option for you, I would suggest you get that in as soon as possible. That means that you're going to get your ballot as soon as possible. And if there were something that went wrong, let's say it did get lost in the mail or something else happened, you'd still have time to get a replacement ballot before the election, because all ballots must be back by 8 p.m. on Election Day ... That absentee ballot is going to have instructions in it too about all those things, so make sure you read those. Make sure you're signing your ballot, make sure your witnesses is signing it. And again, the sooner you get that back, if there are any problems, your clerk can help you correct them. When we get closer and closer to Election Day, there just isn't time to fix those issues. And so it's really, really important to do that now.

**Any other advice you have for voters as we look ahead to the next couple of months?**

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Making sure that you're getting data from legitimate sources of information — at the state, we're doing a lot to work on getting information to voters where they go and where they trust, but also know that you've got 1,850 local election officials that are also legitimate sources of information, and your 72 counties. We find that sometimes, voters have more trust maybe in their local election officials, and that's great. Here in Wisconsin, we have more than any other states in terms of, sort of those official points of information. So I would just caution voters that there's going to be bad information out there and it's going to feel like you're walking through a fog of information. Knowing where to go for legitimate information is really important. So I'd say, going to the state of Wisconsin Elections Commission, your county clerk or your municipal clerk, so your town, city or village clerk, those are the people that are going to know the facts and will be able to show you exactly how elections work. I would be skeptical about information that you see through potentially other sources, because there are some sources that may be trying to confuse voters.

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Briana Reilly covers state government and politics for the Cap Times. She joined the staff in 2019, after working at WisPolitics.com. Follow her on Twitter at @briana\_reilly.

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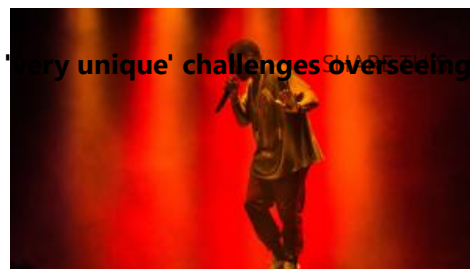
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